

## Howard University Digital Howard @ Howard University

---

Manuscripts for the Grimke Book

Life and Writings of the Grimke Family

---

October 2017

# Sarah and Angelina Grimke

Follow this and additional works at: [http://dh.howard.edu/ajc\\_grimke\\_manuscripts](http://dh.howard.edu/ajc_grimke_manuscripts)

---

### Recommended Citation

"Sarah and Angelina Grimke" (2017). *Manuscripts for the Grimke Book*. 38.  
[http://dh.howard.edu/ajc\\_grimke\\_manuscripts/38](http://dh.howard.edu/ajc_grimke_manuscripts/38)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Life and Writings of the Grimke Family at Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Manuscripts for the Grimke Book by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact [lopez.matthews@howard.edu](mailto:lopez.matthews@howard.edu).



*by permission.*

~~Birney, Catherine H.; Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Lee and Shepard Pub. Boston,~~  
~~New York, Charles T. Dillingham, 1885, p. 289 - 295.~~ *Birney 1885*

A letter from Sarah Grimké to Jane Smith, written in 1850, contains the following paragraph: "We have just heard of the death of our brother Henry, a planter and a kind master. His slaves will feel his loss deeply. They haunt me day and night. Sleeplessness is my portion, thinking what will become of them. Oh, the horrors of slavery!"

When she penned those lines, Sarah little imagined how great a mockery was the title, "kind master," she gave her brother. She little suspected that three of those slaves whose uncertain destiny haunted her pillow were that brother's own children, and that he died leaving the shackles on them - slaves to his heir, their white brother, though he did stipulate that they and their mother should never be sold. Well might Sarah exclaim: "Oh, the horrors of slavery!" but in deepest humiliation and anguish of spirit would the words have been uttered had she known the truth. Montague Grimké inherited his brothers with the rest of the human chattels. He knew they were his brothers, and he never thought of freeing them. They were his to use and to abuse, - to treat them kindly if it suited his mood; to whip them if he fancied; to sell them if he should happen to need money, - and they could not raise voice or hand to prevent it. There was no law to which they could appeal, no refuge they could seek from the very worst with which their brother might threaten them. Was ever any creature - brute or human - in the wide world so defenceless as the plantation slave! The forlorn case of these Grimké boys was that of thousands of others born as they were, and inheriting the intelligence and spirit of independence of their white parent.

I have little space to give to their pitiful story. Many have doubtless heard it. The younger brother, John, was, at least as a child, more fortunate.



When Charleston was at last occupied by the Union army, the two oldest, Francis and Archibald, attracted the attention of some members of the Sanitary Commission by their intelligence and good behavior, and were by them sent to Massachusetts, where some temporary work was found for them. Two vacancies happening to occur in Lincoln University, Oxford, Pennsylvania, they were recommended to fill them. Thither they went in 1866, and, eager and determined to profit by their advantages, they studied so well during the winter months, and worked so diligently to help themselves in the summer, that in spite of the drawbacks of their past life, they rose to honorable positions in the University, and won the regard of all connected with it. Some time in February, 1868, Mrs. Weld read in the Anti-Slavery Standard a notice of a meeting of a literary society at Lincoln University, at which an address was delivered by one of the students, named Francis Grimké. She was surprised, and as she had never before heard of the university, she made some inquiries about it, and was much interested in what she learned of its object and character. She knew that the name of Grimké was confined to the Charleston family, and naturally came to the conclusion, at first, that this student who had attracted her attention was an ex-slave of one of her brothers, and had, as was frequently done, adopted his master's name. But the circumstance worried her. She could not drive it from her mind. She knew so well that blackest page of slavery on which was written the wrongs of its women, that, dreadful as was the suspicion, it slowly grew upon her that the blood of the Grimkes, the proud descendants of the Huguenots, flowed in the veins of this poor colored student. The agitation into which further reflection on the subject threw her came very near making her ill and finally decided her to learn the truth if possible. She addressed a note to Mr. Francis Grimké. The answer she received confirmed her worst fears. He and his brothers were her nephews. Her nerves already unstrung by the dread of this cruel blow, Angelina fainted when it came, and was completely prostrated for several days.



Her husband and sister refrained from disturbing her by a question or a suggestion. Physically stronger than she, they felt the superiority of her spiritual strength, and uncertain, on this most momentous occasion, of their own convictions of duty, they looked to her for the initiative.

The silent conflict in the soul of this tender, conscientious woman during those days of prostration was known only to her God. The question of prejudice had no place in it, - that had long and long ago been cast to the winds. It was the fair name of a loved brother that was at stake, and which must be sustained or blighted by her action. "Ask me not," she once wrote to a young person, "if it is expedient to do what you propose: ask yourself if it is right." This question now came to her in a shape it had never assumed before, and it was hard to answer. But it was no surprise to her family when she came forth from that chamber of suffering and announced her decision. She would acknowledge those nephews. She would not deepen the brand of shame that had been set upon their brows: hers, rather, the privilege to efface it. Her brother had wronged these, his children; his sisters must right them. No doubt of the duty lingered in her mind. Those youths were her own flesh and blood, and though the whole world should scoff, she would not deny them.

Her decision was accepted by her husband and sister without a murmur of dissent. If either had any doubts of its wisdom, they were never uttered; and, as was always the case with them, having once decided in their own minds a question of duty, they acted upon it in no half-way spirit, and with no stinted measures. In the long letter which Angelina wrote to Francis and Archibald Grimké, and which Theodore Weld and Sarah Grimké fully indorsed, there appeared no trace of doubt or indecision. The general tone was just such in which she might have addressed newly-found legitimate nephews. After telling them that if she had not suspected their relationship to herself, she should probably not have written them, she questions them on various points,



showing her desire to be useful to them, and adds, "I want to talk to you face to face, and I am thinking seriously of going on to your Commencement in June."

A few lines further on she says: -

"I will not dwell on the past: let all that go. It cannot be altered. Our work is in the present, and duty calls upon us now so to use the past as to convert its curse into a blessing. I am glad you have taken the name of Grimké. It was once one of the noblest names of Carolina. You, my young friends, now bear this once honored name. I charge you most solemnly, by your upright conduct and your life-long devotion to the eternal principles of justice and humanity and religion, to lift this name out of the dust where it now lies, and set it once more among the princes of our land."

Other letters passed between them until the youths had told all of their history, so painful in its details that Angelina, after glancing at it, put it aside, and for months had not the courage to read it. When June came, though far from well, she summoned up strength and resolution to do as she had proposed in the spring. Accompanied by her oldest son, she attended the Lincoln University Commencement, and made the personal acquaintance of Francis and Archibald Grimké. She found them good-looking, intelligent, and gentlemanly young men; and she took them by the hand, and, to president and professors, acknowledged their claim upon her. She also invited them to visit her at her home, assuring them of a kind reception from every member of her family. She remained a week at Lincoln University, going over with these young men all the details of their treatment by their brother Montague, and of the treatment of the slaves in all the Grimké families. These details brought back freshly to her mind the horrors which had haunted her life in Charleston, and she lived them all over again, even in her dreams. She had been miserably weak and worn for some time before going to Lincoln; and the mental distress she now went through affected her nervous system to such an extent that there is no doubt her life was shortened by it.



The hearty concurrence of every member of the family in the course resolved on towards the nephews shows how united they were in moral sentiment as well as in affection. There was not the slightest hesitancy exhibited. The point touching her brother's shame thrust in the background by the conviction of a higher duty, Mrs. Weld allowed it to trouble her no more, but, with her husband and sister, expressed a feeling of exultation in acknowledging the relationship of the youths, as a testimony and protest against the wickedness of that hate which had always trampled down the people of color because they were as God made them.

On Angelina's return journey, Sarah, ever anxious about her, met her at Newark and accompanied her home. A few weeks later, writing to Sarah Douglass an account of the Grimke boys, she says: -

"They are very promising young men. We all feel deeply interested in them, and I hope to be able to get together money enough to pay the college expenses of the younger. I would rejoice to meet these entirely myself, but, not having the means, I intend to try and collect it somehow. Angelina has not yet recovered from the effects of her journey and the excitement of seeing and talking to those boys, the president, etc. When I met her she was so exhausted and excited that I felt very anxious, and when I found her brain and sight were so disordered that she could not see distinctly, even striking her head several times severely, and that she could not read, I was indeed alarmed. But, notwithstanding all she had suffered, she has not for a moment regretted that she went. She feels that a sacred duty has been performed, and rejoices that she had strength for it."

A few weeks later, she writes: "Nina is about and always busy, often working when she seems ready to drop, sustained by her nervous energy and irresistible will. She has kept up wonderfully under her last painful trial, and has borne it so beautifully that I am afraid she is getting too good to live."



I have no right to say that Angelina Weld suffered martyrdom in every fibre of her proud, sensitive nature during all the first months at least of this trial; but I cannot but believe it. She never spoke of her own feelings to any one but her husband; but Sarah writes to Sarah Douglass in August 1869:-

"My cheerful spirit has been sorely tested for some months. Nina has been sick all summer, is a mere skeleton and looks ten or fifteen years older than she did before that fatal visit to Lincoln University. I do not think that she will ever be the same woman she was before and sometimes I feel sure her toilsome journey on this earth must be near its close. The tears will come whenever I think of it."

But not so! the sisters were to work hand in hand a few years longer; the younger, in her patient suffering, leaning with filial love on the stronger arm of the older, both now gray-haired and beginning to feel the infirmities of age, but still devoted to each other and united in sympathy with every good and progressive movement. The duty, as they conceived it, to their colored nephews was as generously as conscientiously performed. They received them into the family, treated them in every respect as relatives, and exerted themselves to aid them in finishing their education. Francis studied for the ministry, and is now pastor of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church of Washington city. Archibald, through Sarah's exertions and self-denial, took the law course at Harvard, graduated, and has since practised law successfully in Boston. Both are respected by the communities in which they reside. John, the younger brother, remained in the South with his mother.